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Sabbath - Opportunity for Authentic Community

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From the beginning, God set the Sabbath aside and founded it on the basis of community with Himself and with others. It contained the seeds for interpersonal relationships; between one person and another, between man and woman, and between the human being and the environment. In honouring the Sabbath, we experience community through genuine fellowship, mutual inclusivity, and unified purpose. The often-neglected relational aspects of the Sabbath are foundational for authentic community.⁵⁷

The Creation of Community

In the creation week God created community from chaos. As God spoke into the void, the light was gathered with light, the waters were coalesced into their groups, and all manner of flora and fauna were arranged in societies “after their kind” (Gen 1; 12, 25). Challies states:

Seven times in the story of creation (Genesis 1) God looked at what He had created and saw that it was good. What follows in Genesis 2 stands out in contrast. In a perfect and sinless world, where man enjoyed perfect community with his Creator, God, looking at His creation, said, “It is not good for the man to be alone.”⁵⁸

As part of the Creator's perfect plan for humanity to exist in community, the Sabbath was fashioned and made holy (Gen 2:3) in order for the isolation of humankind to be removed from creation. The sanctification of the day did not preclude the need for relationships, but encouraged them. The rest provided on the day was not of a slothful type, but refreshing and renewing to both body and spirit, a time to bond with the entirety of God's family, both the terrestrial and the divine.

⁵⁷ Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day*, (Berrien Springs, MI, Andrews University Press, 2009) 33.

⁵⁸ T. Challies, "One Another - The Bible and Community" [www.Challies.com](http://www.challies.com/archives/articles/one-another-the.php) document: <<http://www.challies.com/archives/articles/one-another-the.php>> July 10, 2004.

Although the Sabbath is referred to as the day God “ceased from creating” (Gen 2:2) at its core it was formed out of God’s overwhelming desire for intimate union with His creation. God ceased from His consecutive days of creativity, stopped setting up the various eco-systems, and started fashioning a time-period of communion. Humanity is not just invited to witness God’s presence but to participate together in the celebration of God’s completed community. The Sabbath was carved out of time, and because God ceased from His other duties on that day it was hallowed and blessed (Exod 20:11). The blessing of the presence of the Creator was an example to humankind that, once a week, relationships needed to come first. Every six days it was necessary for the working to stop and fellowship to begin (Lev 23:2-3).

The Sabbath after the Exodus was a sign (Exod 31:17) to all who witnessed it that community was important and that refreshing fellowship was beneficial for the growth and well being of God’s earthly people. God’s presence provided the day with “safety, security, and equilibrium”⁵⁹ - a balance of freedom and boundaries - creating a space where humanity could feel secure in a loving relationship. Sabbath enhances the connection, with each other and with God, through the bond of the Sabbath meeting (Isa 58:13).

The Benefits of Community

Keeping the Sabbath holy brings closeness to community through the honouring and sharing of Sabbath celebration. Moltmann states:

For the sake of this celebration, everything, which exists, was created. In order not to celebrate alone, God created the heavens and the earth, the dancing stars and the swaying seas, the fields and the woods, the animals, the plants, and last of all, human beings. They are all invited to God’s Sabbath celebration. They are all - each in its own way - God’s companions in celebration.⁶⁰

The celebration of the Sabbath provides a stable foundation for community building as we experience worship together and live with authenticity before our Lord. The Sabbath has the potential to address any inadequacies in the relationship God desires with and for His people. Feelings of pride, superiority, and selfishness poison the Sabbath community and only seek to interfere with our fellowship on this day of “holy convocation” (Lev 23:3).

⁵⁹ J.H. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 146.

⁶⁰ J. Moltmann, "The Sabbath: the feast of creation." *Journal of Family Ministry* 14, no. 4 (2000): 38.

Stanley Grenz states, sins such as these lead to a “disruption of community”⁶¹ and only highlight “our human failure to live in community with God, each other and the natural environment.”⁶²

The Process of Building Community

For fellowship to be other than a ruse, persons need to be willing to lower their defences and share what they are truly feeling. This can be a risky endeavour, as ridicule or indifference may greet them, but risk is necessary for authentic community to form and for honest fellowship to exist. God took a risk when creating man in giving him free choice, but that is what correct community demands (Joshua 24:15). Hybels states,

It’s a great temptation for small groups of people to slide into a state where they are not *quite* telling each other the truth and they are not *quite* celebrating each other. Instead they tolerate each other, they accommodate each other, and they settle for sitting on unspoken matters that separate them. ”⁶³

Without vulnerability authentic community fails. Persons must know they are valued by others to feel part of a community. Sabbath is about coming together, putting aside divisive variances and, instead, celebrating the distinctive differences God has created (Isa 56:7). In it various races, genders, ages and characters all finding unity in the love and adoration of God (Exod 20:8-11). True Sabbath fellowship breaks through the falsehood of individualism, reassembles the “atomized”⁶⁴ society and opens a door to a wonderful mosaic of community. Unity is possible within the divine fellowship of love and acceptance.

The Sabbath is also a time of emptying - not of the day, but of the believer’s heart. True openness between individuals is vital for community development. It is a time of reflection on the personal journey of the individual and a moment of communal reflection of what has happened during the interval to bring the community together. Sabbath time, as shown in the ancient world, was a time of putting aside your personal pride and humbling yourself before God. This was vividly symbolized by the action of bringing a sacrifice to the temple as a sign of personal sin (Lev 4:27-29) and the admission of personal responsibility for breaking fellowship with God during the week. The admission of sin

⁶¹ J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 187.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Hybels, Bill. *Axiom: Powerful Leadership Proverbs*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008.

⁶⁴ D. Elazar, "Why Public Standards of Sabbath Observance" [www.jcpa.org document: <http://www.jcpa.org/dje/articles/sabbobs.htm>](http://www.jcpa.org/dje/articles/sabbobs.htm) 1992.

facilitated the emptying of pride and self importance. In today's society we do not have a visible sacrifice on the Sabbath day, but instead we offer the sacrifice of our lives to God (Rom 12:1). The solution to the problems we face as individuals is often found when we cease trying to fix ourselves and start taking a look at the world around us and noticing what we can do. In 2004 Lee Levett-Olson quoted from renowned social psychologist Erich Fromm concerning the vision of a Sabbath community that provides:

Security in the sense that the basic material conditions for a dignified life are not threatened; *Justice* in the sense that nobody can be an end for the purpose of another, and *freedom* in the sense that each [person] has the possibility to be an active and responsible member of society.⁶⁵

Authentic community, as experienced through the Sabbath, encourages a focus upon others to discover the true condition of those who associate with us. Just as God ceased from His activity to enjoy fellowship with His creation, we then should “follow the pattern set by the Creator”⁶⁶ and “enter into a closer relationship with Him”⁶⁷ through the door to community opened by Him. God exists at the centre of the relational sphere of the Sabbath. As worshippers come closer to Him they also come in contact with one another, facilitating opportunities to share and support each other in the unified goal of oneness with God.

The Return to Community

The result of living the Sabbath is authentic community. Authentic community exists when members of the community are in complete empathy with one another, are sincere in their joint desires, and are seeking after the good of the whole. The church in Acts was just such a community, as they shared a “single-minded devotion”⁶⁸ and an “openhearted attitude, where no pretence and performance in the way the believers behaved.”⁶⁹ This was a community which could share freely, encourage consistently, and love unconditionally. The early church met daily (Acts 2:46) to foster this fellowship, but then came together on the Sabbath in unified worship to God and continued edification of each other in the house of the Lord (Acts 13:42-44).

⁶⁵ Levett-Olson, Lee, “Building a Sabbath Community”
<<http://www.alphasys.com.au/uca2/trunk/images/pdfs/issues/living-sustainably/resources/building.pdf>>
October 2009.

⁶⁶ J. McKeown, *The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary: Genesis*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 28.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ A. Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI : Zondervan, 1998), 123.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Since we are living, free-thinking organisms there is certain to be some differences of opinion, but true community welcomes these discussions, is not afraid of new ideas, and respects others with differing viewpoints. Brueggemann states, “The trick of community is to hold together real differences of interest in the midst of treasuring a passionate commitment to belong faithfully to one another.”⁷⁰ The harmony found in Sabbath community is not in the sameness of the members’ ideas, but in the unified ideals of the community. The sense of a unified purpose and goal brings people together in the worship of God and the encouragement of each other. A Sabbath community could then be defined as a group of people, depending on each other and on God, sharing the same sanctified time as the creator of the universe, and interacting with God, and each other, through various means.

Thus, the Sabbath reveals itself as not just a time of holy living, but also a weekly season of growth in the field of fellowship and community. The day is not exclusive to the hallowed, but rather, provides a mutually inclusive realm where worship of the of the divine can co-exist beside the enrichment of humankind’s greatest need; the need to belong, to rest in the comfort of acceptance. On the Sabbath, the society of man and the sacred communion with God come together and each realm is enriched and emboldened by the experience.

The Sabbath is a day of relational development, providing a time of free flowing communication without distractions to hinder understanding. It is a time of reflection on the relationship choices you have made and rejoicing in the community you have achieved. The Sabbath enhances our community, unites us in a common goal, and brings us closer to each other in a way that no other time period is able to do.

In these times when true community has been replaced by social networking sites and acceptance comes packaged with conformity, the Sabbath stands as a reminder that we all do belong, despite our differences. The day God set aside as a monument of creation is also a day to throw off the shackles of sameness, and unify in the worship of our God who fashioned variety. It is an experience which houses blessings for the participant, and for the One on the throne of the universe. The Sabbath requires us to be honest with each other

⁷⁰ W. Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes*. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 37.

and to share of ourselves with our fellow humanity. Finally, it enables us to honour the Lord in a spirit of authentic community. We have opportunity to experience community as it was intended by the Godhead from the beginning.